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A plea for women's trade unions

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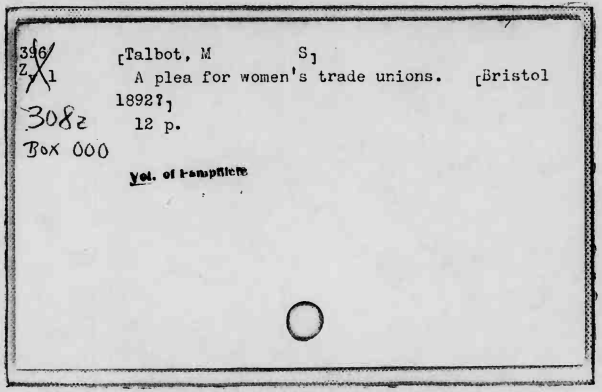

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From the FABIAN SOCIETY,
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Pamph

No 3

A Plea

for

Women's Trade Unions.

No 3

A Plea

FOR

Women's Trade Unions.

"There is no clearer ordinance of that Supreme Reason, often dark to us, which governs the course of man's affairs, than that no body of men should in the long run be able to strengthen itself at the cost of others' weakness."

"'Tis the sublime of man
Our noontide majesty, to know ourselves
Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole.
This fraternizes man: this constitutes
Our charities and bearings."

TO those women of the educated and leisured class who have had personal experience of the working of Trades Unions among Women; and who, while knowing the great difficulties, the special dangers, and the slow results of the movement, are yet fully persuaded of the value, indeed of the necessity, of combination, the following words are not addressed.

But there are many who have no such experience. And when they read from time to time in the papers the accounts of Labour troubles, of strikes and lock-outs, of interruption to the orderly supply of coal, gas, &c, which the even tenor of our industrial system has taught us to expect and receive with as little wonder and thankfulness as the common air we breathe, they are apt to turn with distrust and distaste from all movements which appear to originate and foster these unpleasant signs of unrest and dissatisfaction.

In the compass of a brief paper it is not possible to give a full account of all the causes of these modern industrial troubles. But we may accept, without lengthy proof, the assertion that they come from a sense of something wrong, something hard in industrial lives which the sufferers feel can be and ought to be removed or mitigated. Is this sense to be developed or repressed? Is it a "noble discontent?" or, Is it a spirit of unreasoning revolt and rebellion against the necessary condition of work, which is but another name for human life? Now, many who have closely watched and intimately shared in these social struggles are persuaded that "underlying all this tumult and strife, these strikes and lock-outs, meetings,

trampings and demonstrations, there are great moral and spiritual forces at work, which are not always revealed to the superficial observer." And with this conviction, we entreat the attention—for then we have good hope of winning the sympathy of the hundreds of good women, who, while willing to lay down life, and health, and leisure in the service of the poor, still hold aloof from this Trade Union movement from want of comprehension of its great significance and value.

And here it is well to say at the outset that its greatest aim and use is not what necessarily has assumed the chief prominence, and has often given the first impulse to the formation of Unions—namely, their power to affect Wages. No doubt combination amongst wage-earners has a tendency to prevent unnecessary, unjust reductions, and occasionally to gain an increase of remuneration. This feature may well attract attention in contrast to the powerlessness of the solitary individual in his isolated struggle for the means of subsistence. But though this advantage appeals most quickly and forcibly to working men and women, the thoughtful and far-seeing are aware that the power of Unions to affect wages in the long run is limited by many other causes, such as foreign competition, the variations of demand, the general prosperity or depression of trade at any given time, &c, &c. And it is not for this object *chiefly* that women should be urged to organise and combine.

The general public is necessarily very slightly acquainted with the conditions under which thousands of women and girls are working in factories, workshops, laundries and at home, on work given out from factories. All sorts of abuses are apt to creep into factories and workshops where crowds of timid, unorganized women work. Acts and laws for the protection and regulation of their labour may be passed, but for want of enforcement they become practically a dead letter. A few of the more intelligent women probably know of these Acts, but what solitary woman dare call attention to their infringement? She knows she would become a marked woman at once, and a pretext for dismissal would soon be found. It is this powerlessness of the individual woman, coupled with the knowledge of the conditions under which they pursue their daily toil, that affords the most powerful argument for the need of combination among women workers. For a knowledge of these conditions many of us can go to the women themselves, and hear from their own lips of work in unwholesome, ill-ventilated workrooms; of insanitary and indecent arrangements in factories; of unjust and oppressive fines; of unkind and tyrannical conduct,

and abusive language from foremen and forewomen; of work continued at meal-times and beyond lawful hours, both contrary to the very letter of the Factory Acts, &c.

And those whom circumstances debar from this personal acquaintance may read details, collected in the calm spirit of judicial enquiry, in the two leaflets, "How Women Work," published by the Women's Trade Union Association, being extracts from the evidence given in the course of the recent Labour Commission. There are stated the conditions spoken of above, and there may be seen the powerlessness of the solitary worker, to profit by the Acts framed expressly for her benefit and protection. A study of facts like these will do more than abstract arguments to remove the idea which exists in many minds, that the growing desire in the working class for power to regulate their own lives, must be looked on with fear, and resisted lest it should degenerate into a "new tyranny." Doubtless, all power unchecked and unrestrained (as this power will never be) has such dangers; but on the other hand, to be a human being and to have no power at all is, in other words, to be a slave. It is no heated phrase which describes thousands of poor women-workers as "slaves of civilization."

What is slavery except work under compulsion, without a voice in the bargain by which labour is exchanged for wages? Women who are compelled to sell their toil at the lowest possible rate are not, in any true sense, *free*. The workers' equitable rights are disregarded when the power to share in the regulation of their labour, both as to wages and to conditions, is not claimed by themselves, or is denied to them by their employers. It is freedom, then,—freedom to pursue and achieve the highest interests of all, which is the most enduring good of the united action of Trades Unionism. Nor should this spirit of freedom, and the growing desire for it, be mistaken for its counterfeit, the spirit of lawlessness. For, "Freedom means something else than doing what one likes . . . It is a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow-men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them."

The men and women who frame and willingly submit to laws, calculated to promote the large and general good, are developing those qualities of character, which alone can produce peaceful and prosperous industrial relations with their employers. It is a wise employer, Mr William Blades, who says, "this word, Freedom, is perhaps the most ill-abused word in our language. In these days of severe competition, when a long schedule of work is given out to be tendered for, it is of vital

importance to an employer to know that his co-competitors must pay for the workmen's labour the same price as he does. Not unfrequently it happens that anxiety to get work induces an employer to put in a tender which he finds, too late, will not pay. His great aim then is to pare down cost, and wages is naturally the first thing that tempts him. In such a case the workman unsupported by his Union would be at the mercy of his employer, and reduction must follow reduction till "sweating" (starvation wages) is reached. The employer who wished his men to be paid fairly would be compelled to follow suit or see his trade collapse . . . . Obedience therefore to a generally received scale" (both of wages, and of regulations as to hours, conditions, &c) "is not curtailing the employers' *freedom* of contract," while we may add it seems the only method under which the workman can be truly free.

Such words from an employer may help to remove the dread lest organization on the part of workers should weaken the bond which connects the owners of capital and the owners of labour. Their inter-dependence exists, but cannot now maintain the form it had in the old state of the Industrial world before the introduction of machinery and the immense increase of population, massed together in our large towns. The apprentice who formerly lived in his master's house, the workmen who dwelt hard by the employer's own door, and worked under his eye, were naturally bound by a closer personal tie than is possible now, when the owner of large works lives at a distance, or is an impersonal, soul-less Company, known only to the operatives through the medium of overseers and foremen. Formerly the good master stood almost in a paternal relation to his men, and was deservedly requited by loyalty and fidelity. It is not possible that the owner of a thousand "hands" can have such a relation. With the best intentions his dealings with them cannot be individual. In the orderly expression, therefore, of their organized voice, the faithful employer is thankful to know that the men and women who are his fellow-workers in business, can put him in possession of facts which he could not otherwise know,—facts which touch his interests as they affect theirs. If the peaceful work of Boards of Arbitration and Conciliation, is, according to all our hopes, eventually to supersede the strife and loss and confusion of the Strike and the Lock out, it can only be when the organization of the workers is complete and permanent.*

* See "The Growth of Industrial Peace," by John Rae—*Contemporary Review*, September 1892.

Enough, perhaps, has been said to indicate the necessity for combination. Let us consider what it can effect among women, above and beyond its power to restrain the evils of unlimited competition. It is always difficult to express, without exaggeration, the slow growth of all moral changes. But there *is* such gradual improvement when women enter into association with others, their sisters and fellow-workers. It ennobles the necessary toil for daily bread for themselves and those dependent on them, when they learn to consider their actions, not only from the personal point of their private advantage, but in reference to what is best for all. And a wider comprehension even of their own needs begins. Hardships, wrongs, submitted to with dull, miserable resignation to the inevitable, are now seen to be capable of removal. Hope springs up, and with it a new bond of sympathy and disinterested regard for those who work shoulder to shoulder in the same cause.

As a testimony to the educative power of association, a woman of large experience in such work, writes, "I do wish you could see our young Union girls manage their own club. But to see them now, unless you had seen them two years ago, would only shew you half. No one has taught these girls to behave or to dress quietly. It has all grown of itself, as they learned pride and self-respect through their Union. Their business meetings might be an example to many Societies of educated men." And consider what this advance means. Life is one. The self-respecting, intelligent girl at her club, will carry these qualities into her life in her home, in the street, in the workshop.

Perhaps none of us know how much we owe of our own good conduct, such as it is, to the atmosphere of the public opinion in which we pass our lives. The isolated life of solitary struggle is less than human. In it, no character can grow, and learn the great invaluable lessons of unselfishness, of sympathy and interest in other lives, and other matters than those of personal need,—all that makes human life wide and rich and happy. Is not this the true answer to some who say, that while the principles of Trade Unionism are still partially unknown, it is well for women to wait till some perfect scheme has been elaborated, which they may then be invited to join? The truth is, we learn by experience, and by experience only. It is the mere "hearing of the ear," till we have ourselves begun to try and put in practice the wisdom of the wise. Error and mistake may very likely creep in, in the early management of Women's Unions, but these very

mistakes will be education, and it is by their own action only, that women, like men, can learn the principles and gain the benefits, material and immaterial, which arise from combination.

The extremely low standard of life, of comfort, of intelligence among the poorest class of working-women, is at present all that is possible to them. Can words more full of tragic pathos be found than those said more than once by poor women, when describing their desperate shifts to keep body and soul together, they add "But there —— it's not living." Such toil as this, lowers mentally, morally, physically. Even the wish to better their condition fades away in the one dull desire to get their day's dreary labour accomplished and its scanty reward earned. Can we expect such women to improve alone? The lethargy and apathy which lives like theirs engender, is the greatest obstacle which all efforts to improve their condition have to encounter. And it is obvious that without some co-operation on the part of women themselves, no great progress is possible. But it has been found that when a few of the more intelligent and enterprising, who are naturally most often to be found among the younger members of a trade, can be led to see the benefit of combination, those who might not have originated such a scheme, can profit by the association with others, and gain in courage and intelligence, as the sense of hopeless solitude decreases. Even to meet and speak of difficulties is better, and more hopeful, than to suffer in the sullen silence of despair.

We believe then, that all who spend their time and love in trying to better the conditions of working-women, who best know their dark temptations to drink, immorality, and low coarse pleasures, temptations which spring from the very hardness of their lives, will find in the cheerful publicity which comes with all association, a true ally to their efforts for women's good. Their help is wanted and their sympathy, that they may take part in teaching the true value and meaning of Trade Unionism. It is a very real stumbling block to the progress of this movement among women, when their loved and trusted teachers disapprove—when the lady, perhaps, whose Bible lesson on Sunday is the chief spiritual influence in their lives looks askance at the proceedings of Trade Unions, and advises submission and patience, under evils which admit of remedy.

It is the best working-women who accept such passive counsels most readily; but it is just these best women who would be the finest instruments in the work of progress, if the true principle of action in the matter were

shown to them; and if they were supported in the trials and self-denials which all efforts for the general good entail, by the sure conviction that they were doing their duty.

It is doubtless a difficult and delicate question to decide where the limits of submission cease, and the duty of resistance and opposition begin. In every true life there must be an element of submission to the inevitable trials and limitations of our human lot. Such submission is at once our highest wisdom, our deepest faith and the only way of peace. It is one of the chief blessings of Christian faith that it can breathe this spirit of peace amid the sharpest troubles of life, transmuting their evil into good. But there are evils of another kind against which it is our highest duty to set ourselves in strenuous conflict. Such are the wrongs which spring from human selfishness, injustice, avarice, and thoughtless neglectful indifference. To submit to these when by patience, courage and unwearied struggle, a better state can be won both for ourselves and others is not virtue, but a grave failure in duty. It is this hard, self-sacrificing effort for the common good which should be set before working women as the sacred cause which should claim their best energies. If the work is undertaken in this spirit there is good reason to hope it will be, as far as possible, free from the taint of passionate, lawless, resentful feeling which may so easily enter in and spoil it, and indefinitely retard its progress. It is because we believe that this endeavour after freedom is, in truth, an endeavour for fuller possibilities of human life—life which shall have more to offer in the service of God and of man, that we can look on its furtherance, as a sacred work, and must earnestly seek to purge it from that "wrath of man" which can never work the "righteousness of God."

But at the best it is slow work. Is not all education slow? Let no one who sets her hand to this, expect other than difficulty and perplexity, and sometimes distressing disappointment. But if once we accept the principle, that it is justice which demands this measure of freedom for the good of working-women, we are armed against difficulty. For "Justice of a more wondrous beauty than the morning and the evening star" is one of the great foundations of the moral government of the world. To work under this conviction for an end which we see to be just, is to work with the courage and energy which commands success. And there is yet another aspect of this question which will appeal to the hearts of those whose chief desire for women, is their moral and spiritual good. Too much has this

end been dissociated in past times from the furtherance of their material welfare. Yet without a certain amount of material well-being, it is rarely possible for the spiritual life to arise and reign amid the over-powering claims, raised by purely animal necessities. The efforts that are made in Church and Chapel, in Sunday Schools, Adult Bible Classes, by Gospel Temperance Societies, at religious and social gatherings, to bring home the deep, moving, life-giving spiritual truths of Christianity, are not enough. They are not enough because they do not fully meet the difficulties of working life in the present day, especially as it is lived in our large populous towns.

Women need to be taught—we all need it—that Christianity is not a thing of the Church and Chapel, and the religious meeting, nor even of the home alone, but that its principles are intended to penetrate the daily life of the factory, the workshop and the laundry. It does not make women religious, in the fullest sense, to be led to dwell now and then on these high truths, if they go back to their occupations and come under the influences of selfish, sordid, debasing conditions of life, and think of them as something with which their religion has nothing to do. We must discover how we can bring these spiritual truths to bear on the lives of women *just where they are*, if they are to exercise an enduring, transforming influence. In combination and association for a common good, experience shows that some deliverance comes from that selfishness and apathy, which bar the way to all spiritual progress. The poor woman striving for her scanty portion of bread for herself or for her family, is necessarily more or less an enemy to every other woman struggling for the same end. She will take the bread out of another's mouth, by accepting work for a few pence less, from the employer who will unscrupulously pay as little as he can to get work done. But the woman who, in her Union, has learned to "look not only on her own things, but on the things of others," who has perhaps had her sincerity tested at times, by much individual self-sacrifice, is lifted on to a higher plane of thinking and feeling, and the lessons of her Christian teachers will fall on a heart prepared by personal experience to believe in the universal, prevailing power of unselfish love.

As we have said, and it cannot be too strongly insisted on, this work of combination must mainly be done by working-women themselves. But in its initial stage, it is possible for educated women to give valuable assistance in the routine of organization. We who are delivered by no virtue of our own, by the accident of birth, by the blessings of civilised and Christian

homes, and generous education, — from this daily toil to win the first material essentials of life, are bound by the deepest and most sacred obligations to share these spiritual possessions with our less favoured sisters.

We ought to be able, from our position, to take a wider and more comprehensive view of the economic questions involved; we should then, learning facts from the workers, be in circumstances to advise and inform as to means and possibilities of remedy. Some fruitless struggles might be avoided in this way—but more important far, would be the value of the sympathy shown in the difficulties and distresses of working lives.

It must be very hard for toiling women to believe that we, the daughters at ease, care at all for their troubles, unless some such sympathy is shown — and it is not possible to tell those, who are still without the experience, of the change and expansion it brings to our own views on the great social and economic questions which touch the lives of the poor, when we associate with them — not with any idea of patronage or even of charity — but of simple work and effort, hand in hand with them, on the great problems of their industrial life. Many of us have felt we never really knew, never truly and deeply sympathized with working women, till we lived and worked with them in this natural and equal relation. What lessons has it not taught ourselves! What an added sense of responsibility has it not brought to our own lives — to see to it, that we have no personal share in "grinding the face of the poor." How much deeper has it made our sense of the far-reaching demand of Christian principles in regions where perhaps it had not before penetrated! How have we begun in an attitude of reverent inquiry to ponder these perplexing industrial problems, realizing, perhaps for the first time, that we become partakers in injustice and in wrong, if we do not consciously, by every means in our power, seek to overcome it, and extend our warmest sympathy to those who are in the forefront of the battle.

The Divine Spirit, which throughout the ages "at sundry times and in divers manners," enlightening the mind of man, has found utterance by his voice, is, "in these last days," awakening us to consider the beauty, the justice, the necessity of freedom for all. "No man can escape the spirit of the age, or do much good except as its servant, but he can be its intelligent servant — not its slave. He can work in the line of the prevailing forces without ceasing to be aware of the dangers into which, if unlimited and uncontrolled, they might bring him."

Shall we then fight against the movement which we find amongst us, or shall we humbly address ourselves to understand and to serve it? The forces which change Society, bringing in, as we believe, a better, fuller, richer, more human life for all, are at work. What has been, is felt to be no measure for what should, nor for what will be "In the moral world the belief that a change ought to occur tends to make it occur." Vain is it to preach content and submission where discontent and battle is the nobler duty. Vainer still to attempt to alleviate by charity, what ought to be amended by Justice. "In the most important things there can be no real help given to any one which breaks down, or fails to draw forth his individual energy and independence."

It is the special education of Trades Unionism that, while maintaining the individual's rights against the grinding pressure of purely economic processes, it does so by making him take part in that life of association and organization, that brotherhood of man with man which is an essential element in human progress, and which creates for the nation "that noblest sort of heart, which is composed of the united will of many citizens."

In Bristol the Association for Promoting Trades Unions among women, attempts to do the work whose scope is indicated in the foregoing pages. More helpers are greatly needed. Any one willing to assist or desirous of further information, is invited to write to

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M. S. TALBOT,
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